

The passengers on the Carnival Cruise ship Splendor got on board last weekend expecting to party like rock stars and dine like kings. That’s why you go on a cruise, right? But then a little fire in the boiler room took out the ship’s electrical system. Suddenly this luxury liner wasn’t quite so luxurious. There was no air conditioning. No hot water. No swimming pool. No casino. Instead of an endless buffet of shrimp cocktail and filet mignon they got Pop-Tarts and canned meat. They were, in the words of one passenger, “floating prisoners.” So what do you do when your dream vacation turns into a Spamcation? Will you sink or swim?

I don’t think Paul was expecting a Carnival Cruise when he got on board the ship in Acts 27. He was already a prisoner, after all, heading to Rome to make his case before the emperor. You could say Paul got himself into this mess. He’d tangled with the Jews in Jerusalem. It had lead to a hearing before the consulate. It hadn’t gone well. They demanded Paul be put on trial, and made plans to ambush and kill him on the way. But Paul got wind of the plot. Because he was a Roman citizen he had the right to appeal to the emperor, which earned him the protection of the Roman guards. That probably saved Paul in Jerusalem, but now that he was on his way he faced a different danger. It was late fall, not a good time of year for sailing: the winds are fierce and the waves are treacherous. Paul warned the captain they should wait for calmer weather, but he was bound and determined to deliver his cargo. It’s not long before their boat was caught up in a fierce storm. The sailors knew what was going to happen next: the ship would smash against the rocks and they would all die a horrible death at sea. So they started working like crazy to save themselves, tossing cargo and extra weight overboard to lighten the load and get out into deeper water. Would they sink or swim?

This isn't an unfamiliar story. Storms show up time and again in the Bible: think of Noah waiting out the rain on the ark; or Jonah hiding from God in the belly of the ship before he meets his fate in the belly of the whale; or the disciples frantically bailing out the boat while Jesus sleeps the storm away on a cushion. These literal storms become a metaphor for the other kinds of storms we face in our lives: marriage troubles and infertility and job loss and parenting problems and aging bodies that start to fall apart. They force us to ask: Will we sink or swim?

Now Paul may be the Christian hero in this story, but I'll be honest: when storms show up in my life I act a lot more like those pagan sailors. I get anxious. I get preoccupied. I try to save myself. Sometimes I'm tempted to give up and jump overboard. It's hard when there are so many rocks out there to smash into. It's hard to stay calm when the checking account is overdrawn again or your teenager won't talk to you or you can't ever seem to get caught up at work. Sometimes it's hard to believe that God is there at all when all you can hear and see and feel is chaos swirling around you.

So why was Paul able to stand there, cool as can be, and tell the other passengers, "Keep up your courage?" I think it has less to do with Paul and more to do with Paul's God. Paul has come to know and trust God through more than 15 years of faithful following. In that time Paul faced more than his share of trouble. He was threatened, beaten, ridiculed, stoned, arrested. But time and again God gave Paul words to say, people to care for him, a path to follow. And even when that path led him into a tempest, God found a way to get him through it. Paul could stay faithful to God because God had always been faithful to him.

That's what happens in this storm. Paul listens for God's voice. He shares a word of encouragement with others. He gives thanks and breaks bread. He holds fast to the

one he knows will not fail him, Jesus Christ. Paul's calm inspires confidence. This time the captain listens to his words. Everyone makes it safely to shore. Not a man is harmed. God's promises prove true once again.

Perhaps it's fitting that the book of Acts culminates with a storm. It reminds us that it hasn't ever been smooth sailing for the church, either. The early Christians faced tremendous challenges. They had to decide *will we sink or will we swim?* The apostles didn't know what to do after Jesus ascended to heaven. *Sink or swim?* They didn't expect that the Holy Spirit would show up through the rush of a violent wind on Pentecost. *Sink or swim?* They didn't expect that the promised land of Jerusalem would become not the destination, but the launching point for God's kingdom. *Sink or swim?* They didn't expect that one of their biggest enemies would become their greatest advocate. *Sink or swim?* They didn't expect that unclean Gentiles would end up sitting side-by-side with them in the pew. *Sink or swim?* They didn't expect that the very existence of the church would be threatened over talk of who's in and who's out of the family. *Sink or swim.* There may not have been literal wind and waves but there were definitely storms a-brewing among God's people. Yet somehow the followers of the Way found a way to swim together, and God brought them through every storm.

Hopefully that's something we've learned from our time in the book of Acts. Life with Christ isn't just about getting through the storm. It's not just about trusting that God will be watching over you. It's about what God is up to in our big world, and how God uses us in the middle of it. Whether we think it or not, whether we even want it or not, God's got bigger plans in mind. Bigger plans for the world, bigger plans for the church, bigger plans for you and for me. What started in Acts continues today – despite and sometimes through the storms we face, as individuals and as the church.

Zumbro has faced its share of storms through the years. But God continues to make things happen. You can see it by what the Spirit has been up to around this place this fall. Since we started this sermon series:

We hosted a big Bluegrass Block Party to reach out to the community.

We've collected coats and socks and food and school supplies for those in need.

We've had lots of people reading the ZLC Text Messages, and talking about them.

We've gathered to tell stories that celebrate our past and ask questions that explore our future.

We've had 26 new families make Zumbro their church home.

We've seen pictures of how *God's work* is done through *our hands*.

We shared lots and lots of bread with our neighbors.

We've had our imagination stretched about what it means to be the church in times like these.

And this is just in the past 8 weeks! Maybe the question isn't *sink or swim*? Maybe it's *what is the Spirit going to stir up next*? My friends, that is exactly the right question for a time like this. It's not about trying to save ourselves. It's about giving God room to work in us so that through our witness others might come to believe.

Yes, if we've learned anything along the way it's that God will continue to call us to lives of faith. That faith might lead us to love our neighbors or welcome children or take care of the poor. It might lead us to give away our money or sponsor a refugee or sign up in Life at Zumbro. That faith might lead us to invite someone to church or visit a shut-in or pray with a friend. It might even lead us to talk about what we believe, so that – like Paul – our confidence can help others know Christ.

Well, we've come to the end of the book. Paul is in Rome. He's living under house arrest. But he's still talking about Jesus. He's teaching to Jew and Gentile, telling everyone he can about the messiah. We're left with a few questions: will he get his audience before the emperor? Will he die for his faith? And even more important: will the good news reach the end of the earth?

I've got news for you, people. This is where we come in. The good news has reached Rochester and beyond. But God's work isn't done yet. As long as there are stories to tell and ears to hear the mighty acts of God won't be finished. It's our turn to get involved. So what is the spirit going to stir up next at Zumbro Lutheran Church? What is the Spirit going to stir up in you? With God's help, let's find out together. Amen.